

The only doctrine I have as an artist is to  
not allow the dust of the past to settle.  
Steve McQueen

# EVERYTHING AND NOTHING IS UP FOR GRABS: USING ARTISTIC METHODS WITHIN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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Steve Pool



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# CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

## Foundation Series

**T**oday we are increasingly seeing calls for universities to collaborate with communities in designing and conducting research. While such calls are to be welcomed they tend to suffer from a historical blind-spot that ignores the fact that research collaboration – partnerships, participation (call it what you will) – is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.

This series of reviews developed as part of the AHRC’s Connected Communities Programme, sets out to make visible some of these traditions of collaborative research. In doing so, the series aims to:

- help those who are new to the field to understand the huge wealth of history and resources that they might draw upon when beginning their own research collaborations;
- help those who seek to fund and promote collaborative research to understand the philosophical and political underpinnings of different traditions; and
- support those working in these traditions to identify points of commonality and difference in their methods and philosophies as a basis for strengthening the practice of collaborative research as a whole.

***Research collaboration is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.***

The eight reviews in the series were developed to provide eight very different ‘takes’ on the histories of collaborative research practices in the arts, humanities and social sciences. They do not pretend to be exhaustive, but to provide a personal perspective from the authors on the traditions that they are working within. As we worked together as a group to develop these, however, a number of commonalities emerged:

1. A critique of the mission-creep of scientific knowledge practices into the social sciences and humanities, and of the claims to produce universally valid forms of knowledge from specific limited institutional, cultural and social positions.
2. A commitment to creating research practices that enable diverse experiences of life and diverse knowledge traditions to be voiced and heard.
3. A resistance to seeing research methods as simply a technocratic matter; recognising instead that choices about how, where and with whom knowledge is created presuppose particular theories of reality, of power and of knowledge.
4. A commitment to grapple with questions of power, expertise and quality and to resist the idea that ‘anything goes’ in collaborative research and practice. There are better and worse ways of developing participation in research practice, there are conditions and constraints that make collaboration at times unethical.

At the same time, a set of names and events recur throughout the reviews: John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway appear as theorists and practitioners who provide powerful philosophical resources for thinking with. Critical incidents and moments reappear across the reviews: the rise of anti-colonial movements in the 1950s and 1960s, of second wave feminism and critical race theory in the 1960s and 1970s; of disability rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s; of post-human and ecological analyses in the 1990s and 2000s. Read as a whole, these reviews demonstrate the intellectual coherence and vibrancy of these many-threaded and interwoven histories of engaged scholarship and scholarly social action.

The first of the reviews, by **Kevin Myers** and **Ian Grosvenor**, discusses the long tradition of ‘history from below’ as a collaborative enterprise between researchers, archivists, curators, teachers, enthusiasts, local historians, archaeologists and researchers. They discuss the emergence of the ‘professional historian’ alongside the rise of the nation state, and the way in which this idea was challenged and deepened by the emergence of activist histories in the mid-20th century. They investigate the precedents set by the rise of groups such as the History Workshop movement and trace their legacies through a set of case studies that explore feminist histories of Birmingham, disabled people’s histories of the First World War and the critique of white histories of conflict emerging from the work of black historians and communities.

Two of the reviews explore currents within participatory and critical research traditions. Niamh Moore explores these traditions through the lens of feminist philosophies and methodologies, while Tom Wakeford and Javier Sanchez Rodriguez explore the history of participatory action research (PAR) and its ties to social movements outside the academy.

**Niamh Moore's** review highlights the strategic contributions made to participatory research through the traditions of feminist and indigenous methodologies. Drawing on Donna Haraway's metaphor of the cat's cradle, Moore explores the way that these different traditions have learned from each other, fed into each other and been in (productive) tensions over the years. Importantly, she makes visible the common threads of these traditions, including a concern with questions of power, matters of voice, agency and empowerment and reflexivity. She identifies examples that include: popular epidemiology and women's health; the controversies and emerging insights arising from the publication of the book 'I Rigoberta Menchú' (a collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan activist and Peace Prize winner and anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray); and the online Mukurtu platform for sharing and curating community stories.

**Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez's** review is written from the position of individuals who situate themselves as both activists and academics. From a perspective both inside and outside the academy, they make visible the traditions of participatory action research that have evolved in social movements and their interaction with academic knowledge. They explain how PAR emerged as a practice that seeks to intervene and act on the world through disrupting assumptions about who has knowledge, and by building intercultural dialogue between those whose interests have historically been marginalised and those experts and institutions in dominant positions. They discuss the contributions of Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, as well as the emergence within universities of centres for Action Research and indigenist approaches to research before exploring recent examples of PAR from the Highlander Folk School in the US, to the Cumbrian Hill Farmers post Chernobyl, to questions of Food Sovereignty in India (amongst others).

Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge.

Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge. Such a turn, however, can often overlook the distinctive and sustained tradition within contemporary arts of reflecting upon the question of how publics can come to participate in arts practices. Our series therefore includes two reflections on this question from different perspectives:

First, **Anne Douglas'** review offers a 'poetics of participation in contemporary arts', locating the turn to participation in contemporary arts within a wider history of 20th and 21st century arts and politics. She highlights the huge range of work by artists and arts co-operatives who are seeking to make work through participatory forms, and the deep scholarly tensions and debates that surround these practices. She explores through this rich history the debates over whether participation has become instrumentalised; whether the art/life divide should be preserved or eroded; the links between participatory aesthetics and cybernetic ethics; and the capacity for participation to challenge alienation and neoliberalism. Recognising arts practice as itself a form of research and inquiry into the world, she concludes with a set of powerful reflections on the role of the freedom to improvise and the importance of participation as a moment of care for and empathy with the other.

Second, **Steve Pool**, community artist and academic, reflects on the related but different traditions of community arts as they might relate to social science research. He considers what researchers in the social sciences might need to know and understand about artistic traditions if they desire to mobilise arts practice within the social sciences. He discusses the increasing democratisation of tools for making, the potential for them to open up artistic practice to publics as well as the importance of recognising that such practices are part of wider traditions and philosophies about the value and purpose of art. In particular, he discusses the tension between the idea of artistic autonomy – art for art's sake – and artistic democracy – the democratic creativity of all individuals. He foregrounds the way in which the community arts movement was also allied to a wider politics that moved towards cultural democracy and explores the contemporary practice of artists working in and with social science through examples such as Nicola Atkinson's 'Odd Numbers' and the Community Arts Zone's 'Being Cindy Sherman'.

More recent traditions of collaborative research characterise our final three reviews which take on, respectively, the way that design theory and practice are playing an important role in reshaping society, products and services; the emergence of new technologies to facilitate new forms of collaboration; and the increasingly urgent injunction to develop research approaches that enable collaboration with the 'more-than-human' others with whom we share the planet.

**Theodore Zamenopoulos** and **Katerina Alexiou** discuss the field of co-design and its underpinning theories and methods. They argue that Design as a process is always concerned with addressing a challenge or opportunity to create a better future reality, and explore how co-design has evolved as a process of ensuring that those with the life experiences, expertise and knowledge are actively involved in these making new tools, products and services. They observe how the participatory turn in this field has been concerned with both changing the objects of design – whether this is services or objects – *and* with the changing processes of designing itself. They highlight four major traditions and their distinctive approaches, before exploring the politics and practices of co-design through case studies of work.

**Chiara Bonacchi** explores how the internet is enabling new forms of collaborative knowledge production at a massive scale. She locates this discussion in the traditions of citizen science and public humanities, and examines how these have been reshaped through the development of hacker communities, open innovation and crowd-sourcing. In this process, she discusses the new exclusions and opportunities that are emerging through the development of projects that mobilise mass contribution. She examines the cases of MicroPasts and TrowelBlazers that demonstrate how these methods are being used in the humanities. In particular, she explores the ethical questions that emerge in these online collaborative spaces and the need for a values-based approach to their design.

**Tehseen Noorani** and **Julian Brigstocke** conclude the series with an exploration of the practice and philosophy of 'more-than-human research' which seeks to build collaborative research with non-human/more-than-human others. They discuss its philosophical foundations in pragmatism, ecofeminism and indigenous knowledge traditions and identify some of the theoretical and practical challenges that are raised when researchers from humanist traditions begin to explore how to 'give voice' to non-human others. In the review, they consider how researchers might expand their 'repertoires of listening' and address the ethical challenges of such research. To ground their analysis, they discuss the work of the Listening to Voices Project as well as accounts of researcher-animal partnerships and projects that draw on Mayan cosmology as a means of working with sustainable forestry in Guatemala.

This collection of reviews is far from exhaustive. There are other histories of collaborative research that are under-written here – there is much more to be said (as we discuss elsewhere) on the relationship between race and the academic production of knowledge. Each of these accounts is also personal, navigating a distinctive voiced route through the particular history they are narrating.

Despite this, at a time when politics is polarising into a binary choice between 'expert knowledge' and 'populism', these reviews show, collectively, that another way is possible. They demonstrate that sustained collaborative research partnerships between publics, community researchers, civil society, universities and artists are not only possible, but that they can and do produce knowledge, experiences and insights that are both intellectually robust and socially powerful.

**Professor Keri Facer**

**Dr Katherine Dunleavy**

Joint Editors: Connected Communities Foundation Series

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steve Pool** trained as a sculptor and now works as a visual artist in multiple media to help people realise ideas, often making physical objects or changing environments. He has an interest in stories, space and co-produced research. He is involved in projects that are concerned with making change with a focus on the role of the artist within society. He has worked on many initiatives including the AHRC Connected Communities program, Creative Partnerships and a number of regeneration projects through area-based renewal programs. In 2010, Steve and, fellow artist, Kate Genever established The Poly-technic and work collaboratively to develop arts practice with a focus on social justice ([poly-technic.co.uk](http://poly-technic.co.uk)).

## PREFACE APOLOGIES

I make no apologies for this writing; it is presented in good faith from my perspective as an artist practitioner and my 12 year encounter with research. It draws from literature, conversations in pubs, church halls, schools and art galleries. It references artworks on equal terms with academic writing and what I have recently learned to call 'grey literature'. It tells stories that are only just supposed to make sense.

Under my desk, I have a large tangle of cables and chargers that at one point connected to pieces of electronic equipment. There are so many now, that I have forgotten what most of them do or lost the device they connect to. I keep them just in case they may be useful. One day, when I am not that busy, I aspire to sorting them out. I will coil them into neat loops and remember what they connected to but I know it will not be long before they are in a mess again. What follows is an attempt to try and tidy some loose thoughts, I have probably created a bigger mess and sometimes a mess is useful.

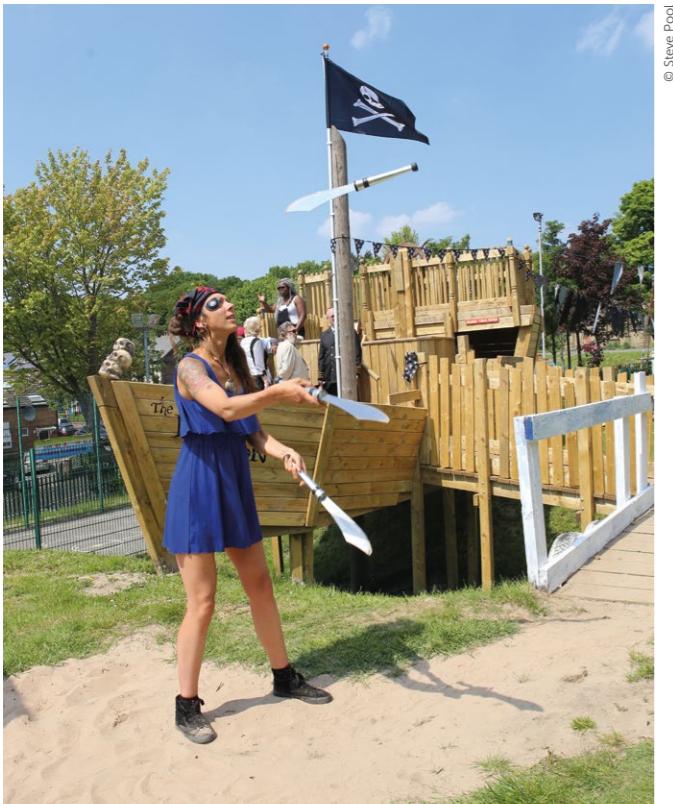


Figure 1  
Steve Pool.  
Pitsmoor adventure playground.

“  
But no  
more apologies.  
No more, no  
more apologies.  
”

(Morrissey, 1984)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A researcher's desire to use *artistic methods* within their work is often underpinned by two fundamental assumptions:

1. The arts offer a space where participants in research are more willing to engage.
2. Artistic methods offer a potential to capture thoughts and ideas that are expressive, emergent and, to an extent, democratic.

Both of these assumptions draw on particular sets of ideas about art and are deeply embedded within art's histories and traditions. The arts offer a vast amount of potential to think and imagine differently, they can reconnect us to our everyday, they can offer alternatives or stand us in front of our truths. This review will explore some key moments in the history of *Participatory Arts*, it will discuss the *Community Arts* movement in the UK and its legacy and explore how this history informs the use of artistic methods within research projects. These artistic turns or movements sit within a broader ecology of philosophical and political ideas not limited to the arts. The contested histories provide a backdrop and, at points, an insight into the different traditions people draw upon when planning to explore artistic methods in their research projects.

Developments in collaborative research have seen an increase in the use of artistic approaches to doing research with people. For example, poets will work with communities to explore hidden histories through the spoken word; young people will use theatre to express feelings of isolation and try to shape local provision.<sup>1</sup> This parallels the history of participation in the arts; from community theatre through to large-scale happenings, to contemporary gallery-based socially engaged practice.<sup>2</sup> The social turn in art production is complex and contradictory; participants become the art, the raw material for art or the artist, often simultaneously. For example, in 2009, Anthony Gormley produced the work *One and Other* where members of the public were given an opportunity to occupy the Forth Plinth in Trafalgar square for periods of an hour for 100 days. The history of participation in the arts includes movements such as Dada, Fluxus and the Situationist International through to more recent explorations of living as form.<sup>3</sup> Art has tried to become 'of the people'.

When speaking of his film *Twelve Years a Slave*, the British artist Steve McQueen said that: 'The only doctrine I have as an artist is to not allow the dust of the past to settle' (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

1  
Facer and Pahl 2017.

2  
Bishop 2012

3  
Thomson et al. 2012.

4  
Steve McQueen 2014: W.E.B. Du Bois Medal acceptance speech, Harvard University.

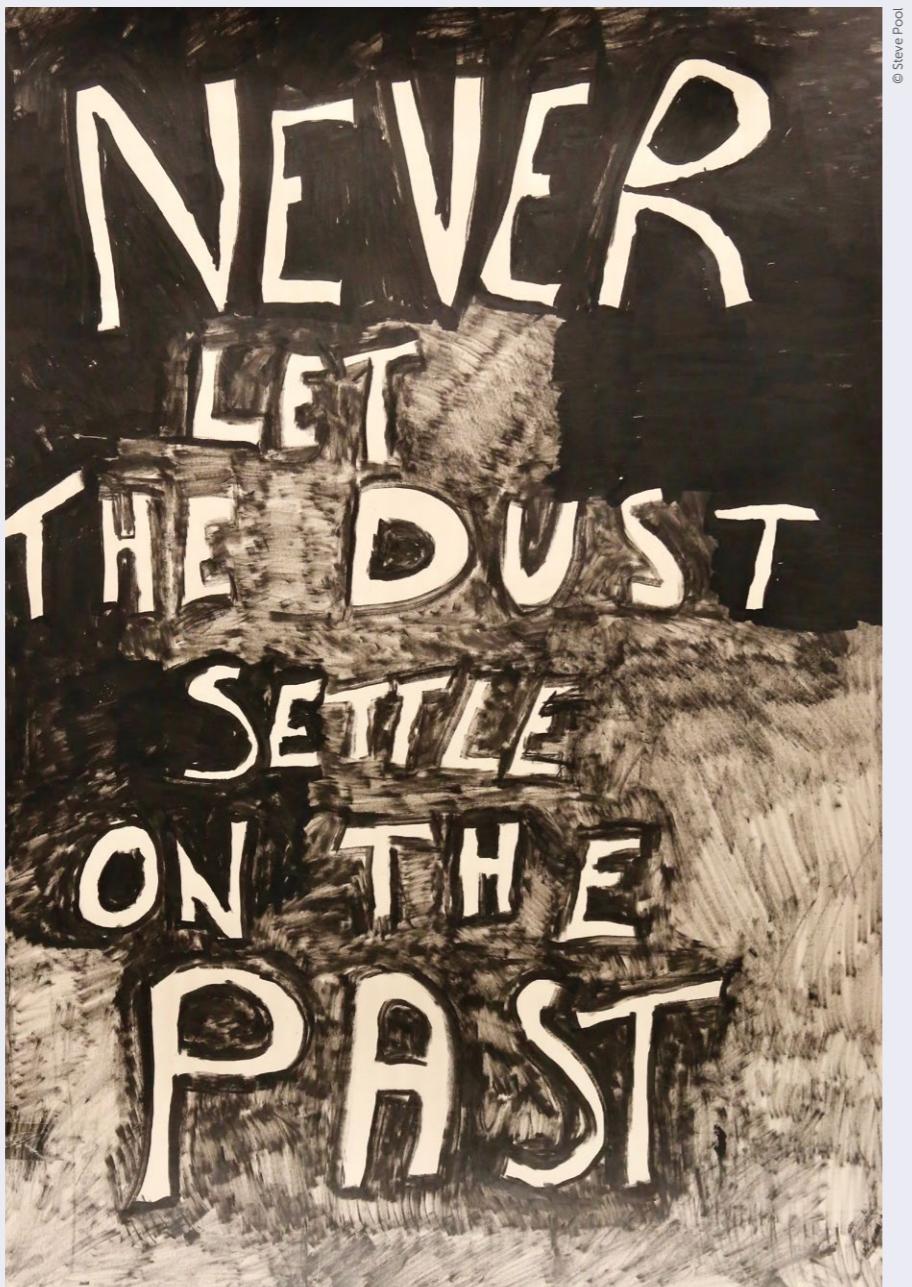


Figure 2  
Steve Pool.  
One full pen poster.

McQueen's dissatisfaction with any given knowledge; the pushing through the difficulties, the attempt to forge new connections and new forms of sense-making, are ambitions shared by many artists and researchers. The processes of doing research and doing art with people can on the surface look the same, yet the intentions of everyone involved can be very different.

As the means of art production become more accessible and the platforms for distribution more democratic, everything seems up for grabs to the researcher. This is a good starting point for anyone intending to explore artistic methods in their research. It is good to believe that everything is available; the tools, approaches, histories, techniques and skills are in fact all open source. The mobile phone provides a video camera, editing suite, sound recorder, and the tools to manipulate and shape content. The Internet, with all its platforms, is a place to share, curate and develop audience. Creative production and consumption is an everyday part of life.<sup>5</sup>

An extensive process of cross-fertilization between research methods, art forms and *artistic practice* has created hybrid forms of research, art and knowledge production. However, the terrain is contested and problematic: process versus product, method opposed to methodology, artists who see themselves as researchers, researchers who aspire to be artists, data versus evidence; the waters are muddy and there is no dry land. In a focus on methods and techniques for participant engagement, it is easy to forget the deep historical and political underpinning, the different traditions and drivers that impact on what is possible and what is desired.

In this review, I will explore some of the histories and traditions that artists and researchers can draw upon when developing participatory research projects. Doing so will probably stir up a lot of dust and ask as many questions as it attempts to answer. As J. M. Barrie points out in *Peter Pan*, 'there is no path through water to the happy hunting ground', it is through working with the difficulties that each of us will develop our practice in line with our experiences.<sup>6</sup>

In this series, Anne Douglas provides an in-depth exploration of practice-based approaches to researching lived experience.<sup>7</sup> Through example and careful critique she expands on current theoretical and critical debates about art as a fully realized methodology. It may be useful to refer to her work for a more detailed account of this tradition.

In contrast, my focus here suggests that everything may be 'up for grabs'. By this I mean that all artistic methods are readily available, they do not require external expertise or experience; anyone and everyone can have a go. The result of this 'having a go' may be very different, each person involved may refine their practice so it comes closer to what they want to be able to say and do with that approach. Whether the method is seen as a tool towards a specific defined end or as a thing in and of itself will impact on what is achieved and also on what success will look like. It is possible to approach an artistic method as part of a tool kit of devices that can liberate participants in research to think differently, to approach the world in a way that enables new thoughts and ideas to emerge collectively.

5  
Papastergiadis 2006.

6  
Barrie (1911) 1991: 143.

7  
Douglas 2018 in this series.

It is also important to be aware that many people who consider themselves as practitioners of an art form see it as a set of processes that are entwined very deeply with their identity. Part of this identity can be a relationship to the art they produce and much of this art can be made or at least shared with other people. However, they may see the art-making process as constituted by more than a set of applied methods. For many artists, an isolation of the methods of art production from a central conception of what art is can reduce art's agency in the world and therefore art's value as a part of research.

Firstly, I will try to clarify what we mean by the term 'artistic methods' in ways that are relevant for the research community (Section 1.1). I will then explore a number of traditions in relation to artistic research including; the history of the Community Arts Movement, *Relational Aesthetics*, and research-based arts practice (Sections 2–4). I finish by looking at some brief case studies of these ideas in practice (Section 5), before offering some reflections (Section 6). Where relevant, I will briefly outline how they connect to cultural and political activism and social arts practices. From these histories I will explore the potential and pitfalls of involving artistic methods in research projects.

I will take into account how the rising interest in collaborative research parallels the growth in readily available access to electronic equipment. The everyday nature of producing content to share on digital platforms has created a blurring between the professional and private producer and, in turn, the legitimacy of creative content and roles within its production. It is important not to ignore this wider social change when we consider what we identify as an artistic method and its potential relationship to what is rapidly becoming part of everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the review, I will focus on what may be useful for any researcher who is planning to develop a participatory research project and draw on artistic methods. It will, no doubt, prompt questions about culture, art, instrumentalism, process and product. I hope they are useful.

---

<sup>8</sup>  
Saito 2010.

  
*People who choose to explore artistic approaches to research are often drawn to a system that questions scientific and positivist views of knowledge creation, foregrounding the situated and aesthetic, and pointing to feeling-orientated ways of knowing and understanding.*  


## 1.1 What do we mean by artistic methods?

Approaches to research that are seen as alternatives to established approaches are often described as 'artistic' and 'creative'; this refers to a broad and shifting terrain where many methods once considered alternative are now accepted as mainstream. I have chosen to use the term 'artistic methods' in an attempt to be more specific, yet I hope not to fall into narrow or territorial definitions. I aim to trace some of the histories and trajectories that impact on the use of artistic approaches within participatory research and in so doing help to clarify what they involve.

Academics and artists have strong opinions on what can and cannot be described as an artistic method. For many academics, it constitutes an alternative to traditional methods used within evaluation, policy development or social science research projects.<sup>9</sup> For most, it includes an applied approach to the use of traditional artistic forms such as poetry, visual art, film and audio, storytelling and music. For others, often from the arts field, artistic research presents a fully formed methodology and validated mode of enquiry.<sup>10</sup> People who choose to explore artistic approaches to research are often drawn to a system that questions scientific and positivist views of knowledge creation, foregrounding the situated and aesthetic, and pointing to feeling-orientated ways of knowing and understanding. There is also a concern in some quarters that doing research 'on people' can be an alienating process that despite the best intentions may not benefit participants or communities (see, for example, the pieces by Moore on feminist and critical approaches to participatory research, and Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez on Participatory Action Research, in this series) and that the use of artistic methods, at worst, makes this process more open and accessible and, at best, offers viable and emancipatory forms of collective knowledge production.

In his book *Small Change*, the development architect Nabil Hamdi suggests that ignorance can be liberating.<sup>11</sup> The art world is massive; it is complex, stratified and hierarchical. Hamdi identifies that the scale of some problems restricts our ability to take action. He proposes that to be ignorant of some aspects of a situation can enable us to take small steps to create small changes that can grow and respond to need over time. Working with Hamdi's ideas of small change, we can suggest that to use an artistic method such as poetry or visual art as part of a research project does not require the researcher to become an expert within the specific art form or in the practice of the whole art world. A level of un-knowing, where everyone becomes a novice and no one claims the role of expert can help to open up new spaces to collectively find things out.<sup>12</sup>

When first thinking of using an artistic method in a research project, however, it is useful to explore a personal relationship to the chosen method by taking stock of your own histories and education. Are you a person who considers yourself musical, expressive, creative? What sets of experiences do you bring to your work? Your personal encounter and perceptions of what art is and whom it is for will impact on how you approach the work. Artistic approaches can be very generative; it can feel like there are too many variables to consider and too much happening for effective forward planning and understanding. As the project begins to involve and work with people this complexity increases and to move forward there is a need to trust in processes and in people's generosity, creative abilities and experience.

For example, the use of video on mobile devices is now a part of many people's everyday life. They may use a mobile phone to record a moment, such as blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, and share this with distant family and friends. This everyday process is used to explore and share lived experience, thoughts and feelings. It is a simple exchange and if it remains within the context of its creation can be used as a way of exploring complex sets of relationships and communicating quickly and effectively.

However, if this short video is placed in the context of research-orientated epistemological framings (for example, as data, representation, visual interpretation, or the lens of ethnographic film) we need to take into account multiple ethical considerations and it is difficult to know where or if to start. The method can become both a tool and a battleground, ignorance can be liberating in terms of removing some of the constraints of traditions, power structures and expectations, yet limiting as we try to develop, learn and provide a wider context that frames an everyday action as research.

A focus on artistic research methods can help distance what we do from who we are or what we define ourselves as. However, it is difficult, and not always useful, to separate any methods from the assemblage of context, histories and traditions they have emerged from. For example, we can use Japanese Haiku as a tool to explore an issue or refine an idea that can be shared within a group setting. However, to understand Haiku as a creative form it is important to recognize the visual moment beyond words that the Haiku points to. As we practice the writing and reading of Haiku we are, through experience, learning a new way to see and feel the world. There are tensions, necessary ones, between opening artistic practice to everyone and recognising its histories, traditions and what can be done with expertise.

It can be problematic to reduce artistic methods to a tool kit, recipe book or road map. Anyone who has tried to mend something and followed a tutorial on YouTube will know the value of a step-by-step approach, given clearly by someone who knows what he or she is doing. However, the world of collaborative research is not the same as mending the central heating, each project or relationship will be uniquely specific to a situation. It is this specificity that makes artistic methods useful as they can adapt and grow and become the most appropriate approach to fast changing situations.

## 2.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS OF PARTICIPATORY ARTS AND RESEARCH

Participating has always been part of art. At a basic level, art can be seen as an exchange; of meaning, of emotion, of sensation, of materials, representations and simulations. The history of art is full of contradictions and counter histories. It can be imagined as a set of progressive steps or a catalogue of useful failures.<sup>13</sup>

Art's relationship to its audience, the use value of an art form and the art form's historic relationship to social responsibility will all impact on how any art form manifests itself within research.

It is ironic that many justifications of the essential connection between art and humanity starts with a description of millennia-old cave paintings. After the mammoth hunt and the cleaning of teeth with a sharpened stick, our ancestors left their marks on the walls. Art is often described as the thing that makes us human, the thing we do after we have done the other things we considered were more important. We could metaphorically draw a line from early human mark making to a trip to choose curtains from Ikea, however this line would not necessarily pass through much that is considered art history. Art's history is massive, it has official and unofficial narratives, movements and counter movements, for some it is ordinary or everyday for others it is performative for many it is appropriated or alien.<sup>14</sup>

There are aspects of Participatory Arts practice that can be copied, borrowed, reimagined within research projects. It is possible to cherry pick some approaches developed by artists or artists groups, it is possible to commission artists to become part of research teams, it is possible to suggest that art history is irrelevant to a research project or, alternatively, at the center of it. There is no clarity and no consistency in art history; it is vast contested and, above all, very messy. This creates opportunities to define and shape it, work within it, or choose to step outside.

It is difficult to separate many artistic methods from the history in which they emerged; they are effectively constituted by the context from which they grew. If they are removed from this context and seen as tools and approaches then that is essentially what they become.

I will now attempt to give an idiosyncratic potted history of more recent movements in art that directly relate to participation in an attempt to draw out some of the key ideologies and drivers that can emerge when conducting research that employs artistic methods and/or artists.

<sup>13</sup>  
Halberstam 2011.

<sup>14</sup>  
On 'ordinary' see Williams 1957; on 'everyday' see Saito 2006; and see Bishop 2012 on 'performative'.

## 2.1 The end of art history: urinals and fountains

Art history ended in 1917, when Marcel Duchamp called a urinal a fountain and hung it upside down on a gallery wall.<sup>15</sup> Art history ended in 1964, when people stopped being able to separate the medium from the message.<sup>16</sup> Art history ended in 1969, when Neil Armstrong first stepped onto the moon; man's apparent conquest of the sublime made all other attempts at doing much of anything else feel a little irrelevant. The apparent end of art history doesn't stop it having a massive impact on how artists work now. One of the great successes of art is its ability to collapse and reinvent itself; it is what keeps it vital and connected. The past 40 years have seen the focus moving away from the chronological development of an art form, for example, painting moving from representation through expressionism to abstraction and surface. Many artists have started to look to the world of social connections to provide the substance to their work, the material of their art.

The move towards more socially focused modes of art production is important for thinking about the relationship between arts practices and collaborative research, as it generates more intersections across practices and potentials for collaborations.

Before focusing on participation in art, it is useful to address one of its core debates, an issue that underpins many of the arguments and generative ideas within art for the last 200 years. It emerges as a disjuncture at key points within authorized art histories and has many names. Here, drawing on the work of Peter Bürger, I will introduce it as the debate between the idea of 'arts autonomy' and the idea of art as part of the 'praxis of everyday life'.<sup>17</sup> This debate may seem far removed from a decision on selecting an artist to collaborate with on a research project, or on what artistic methods or approaches to use.



Figure 3  
Steve Pool.  
Fountain not in use.

15  
Duchamp 1917.

16  
McLuhan 1964.

17  
Bürger 1984.

**One of the great successes of art is its ability to collapse and re-invent itself; it is what keeps it vital and connected.**

### The idea of the autonomous art object

The idea of 'autonomy' in art suggests that art is necessarily and, importantly, separate from the rest of lived experience. It provides a space where difference can happen, a space that can be stepped into metaphorically but not physically. It can be applied to art objects – they become autonomous when they do not rely on their context, how they were made or the intention of their author for their meaning. For example, at the point of publishing, when a work of art is framed, put on a plinth and enters a gallery, the object is set loose, it is birthed into the world and could be described as separate from the praxis of everyday life.

This way of thinking about the art object or any object can appear out of date; it emerged in the writing of Aristotle and was refined by Kant in his writing on aesthetics. It may not feel very relevant to cultural production today, yet it is the cornerstone of thinking of art in a formal way. By 'formal' here I mean the study of the elements of art that are identified as part of that art form, for example, line and texture in painting, or tone and rhythm in music. The idea that art can exist as and for itself and can find a value in being separated from other aspects of life persists within the art establishment and art literature. This is not to say that autonomous art can only refer to itself, rather it is a suggestion that art has no implicit requirement to serve a purpose outside of itself. The implication for research here is that art forms cannot be put to work within other categories of life and maintain the essential nature of what makes art distinctive and separate from everyday life.

If we accept the position that art is not required to attend to an external desire or a purpose, it enables us to associate art with freedom and resistance to judgements by any external value structure. Many artists and practitioners knowingly or unknowingly build an arts practice on these foundations. This makes any attempt to try to apply their work to an identified or practical purpose problematic.

Many artist practitioners are likely to question any given truths, and may resist aesthetic theory and its relevance to their practice; this conjures many possibilities and opportunities. For the researcher, a chance to develop a space that is separate from the everyday can enable new ways of thinking and seeing to take place. For example, a visual artist working within a school, developing a body of work around paint color and emotion would enable a very different response from young people to a classroom workshop developed and targeted to didactically explore the same issue.

The purpose of art is always in discussion. The idea that art does not have to serve a purpose beyond itself is important in terms of associating art with freedom and open expression. Within research projects that use artistic methods, the idea that for art to be art it has to be 'quite useless' may not seem relevant. However, if we look to art to provide a space in which we can escape the constraints and preconceptions of other approaches to knowing and doing, it is important to consider how art forms can enable this space to emerge.

### All art is quite useless.

(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

### “ Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. ”

(Williams, 1958)

### Art as the Praxis of everyday life

British cultural studies has impacted how we perceive cultural production. In his short paper, *Culture is Ordinary*, Raymond Williams asks us to hold culture's two definitions simultaneously.<sup>18</sup> Culture as 'everything that comes together to make us who we are' and culture as in books, plays, paintings and music. He asks us not to divide it up. Williams encourages us not to see culture as bourgeois, high, low, trash, working class, pulp – he asks us to hold all of it at once in its beautiful complexity and see it as ordinary. He writes in the late 1950s and 1960s – in many ways, a time of optimism, a time of hope and a time that heralded 20 years of cultural expansion, including the establishment of Arts Council of Great Britain. Williams was not standing up for a working class culture or a set of traditions, nor was he raging against the rise of popular culture – his point was that culture was part of ordinary life and ordinary people, and that things get simpler if we all begin to see ourselves as ordinary. From this perspective, it is of no surprise that my father, an electrical engineer, is moved nearly to tears by Cornelia Parker's *Thirty Pieces of Silver* hung from the ceiling of a local church, it is no surprise that my friend who works as a stock-taker by night spends his days watching BBC 4, is a regional expert on Viking culture and aspires to tour Europe visiting art galleries.

60 years on from Williams' essay, culture continues to disintegrate into a hierarchy of parts and classifications. Organizations, arts councils and artists continue to put the cart of an extraordinary culture before the horse of ordinary people, expecting everyone to jump in for a ride to somewhere special and surprised that nobody actually goes anywhere different. Most people, on their own terms, are already there.

It may be a leap to consider the implications of Williams' suggestion that culture is ordinary and part of life when considering using artistic methods in participatory research. However, his is a foundational way of thinking that constructs the terrain and impacts directly on how an artistic method can be drawn on within a process of collaborative knowledge production. If all culture is seen as ordinary rather than extraordinary, then all culture is explicitly connected to the everyday, and, therefore, modes of cultural production can be considered ordinary and used in ordinary ways. Writing a poem or painting an emotion is no longer presented as a position of difference (in the Derridean sense) or as an activity separate from society, it is of life and part of life. As such culture may no longer offer a space of difference to look back from or a space of transgression from which to enact change.

In this world of ordinary art, it becomes less critical that art and culture are autonomous from society. By holding multiple definitions of culture and a positive view of people's capacity and potential it becomes less of an imperative for art to create a place that is not instrumental; an art for people's sake becomes possible, rather than an art for arts' sake.

### The implications for collaborative research

These two concepts of culture and art may be helpful to consider when working with artistic methods and with artists in research. It is useful to remember that many arts professionals carry much of this baggage with them. It impacts on the way they work, what they consider to be successful, how they perceive materials, audience, people and themselves. It impacts on the way they work on research projects, what they can and can't offer, and on what an artistic method can do within a research project.

Art as part of the praxis of everyday life and art as autonomous are not mutually exclusive, they can potentially co-exist even within a single project. To achieve this could be as simple as using the categories of applied art and fine art; or **studio art practice** and socially engaged art; or art as a set of methods; or art as a methodology. Many artists happily work across fields and media, some will draw on a studio practice to develop social projects; others will draw a clear line between the place of the studio and the outside world, a line that is crossed by an art object that requires no external explanation or validation or context beyond itself.

Underlying perceptions of what art is and does, however, may still impact on the researcher who decides to make use of an artistic method without involving an arts practitioner. For example, all participants in any project will bring their own experience and understanding of poetry, painting or photography drawing on perceptions of what art is, how it is validated, and previous personal experiences. The researcher may be able to build new shared understanding of the parameters and possibilities within the context of their specific project. Often an ignorance of some of the problems or histories of a new method can be liberating. For example, within much fine art practice originality, authorship and critical reception are important parts of any new work, an ignorance of what has come before may allow participants to discover things for themselves as if for the first time. As people become more experienced, however, it becomes difficult to remain in a state of self-imposed un-knowing for long.

## 2.2 History of the Community Arts movement

The British Community Arts movement can be seen as a period in history where many of the established ideas about art and culture were challenged through the emergence of new approaches and practices.

The philosophical understanding of the nature of art and its relationship to the world discussed earlier may be of little concern while screen printing with teenagers at a youth club or preparing tissue paper lanterns for a night time parade. However, it is still fair to observe that Community Arts asked critical questions about the nature of art: Who it was for? Who could make it? Where it could be seen? The idea that art was available to everyone both as consumers and producers can be summed up in one of the 'movement's early mantras', quoted as a Balinese folk saying by the Canadian intellectual Marshal McLuhan in his influential book on the transforming nature of the media: 'We have no art. We do everything as well as possible'.<sup>19</sup>

The saying was taken to suggest that accepted distinctions between art and life were no longer relevant; it questions a distinct category of things that are art and a distinct category of people who are artists.

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<sup>19</sup>  
McLuhan 64.

Anti-elitists and politically motivated, Community Arts practitioners strove to challenge boundaries and categories that they felt created hierarchies and social division. Their approaches may be useful and attractive to university researchers for a number of reasons:

- They can focus on process rather than product.
- They take place within communities and pay attention to specific community issues.
- They reject ideas of expertise and to an extent develop their own criteria for evaluation.
- There is a tradition of sharing techniques and ideas, everything is up for grabs.

In many ways, the arts methods and techniques used are already seen as tools to challenge the existing structures of power and to build stronger, more resilient communities. Many of the approaches to participatory research outlined by Moore, and Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez in their reviews in this series find their origins in the same historical period and political movements that paralleled the emergence of Community Arts.

The emergence of Community Arts was underpinned by many ideas, yet, as a movement that liked to define itself by its actions rather than a strong theoretical understanding or coherent political position, it remains difficult to pin down. From its origins in the 1960s, the movement was a loose assemblage of approaches, people and organisations. Owen Kelly in his book *Community Art and the State* suggests that the movement was woven from three strands:<sup>20</sup>

Firstly there was the passionate interest in creating new and liberatory forms of expression, [...] Secondly there was the movement by groups of fine artists out of the galleries and into the streets. Thirdly there was the emergence of a new kind of political activist who believed that creativity was an essential tool in any kind of radical struggle.<sup>21</sup>

Many people who work within Participatory Arts today build on the legacy of the Community Arts movement, yet this legacy is not straightforward or well understood. In this section, I will present a brief history of the movement from its origins in the early 1960's through to its decline, or perhaps rebranding, in the mid-1980s.

By the 1960s, the idea that art can be taken to and perhaps improve the lot of the people was not new. Philanthropists and educators such as John Ruskin, had established educational programs, the Workers Educational Alliance ran courses, people's colleges and universities thrived, for a century the state funded museums and galleries that were built across the country. The Workers Education Association was teaching courses where people would learn about painting through doing it themselves. As early as 1934, the Ashington Group (miners from the North of England) painted images of their lives at the pit face, in the allotment or in their homes. The importance of working class writers within theatre and literature and the *Kitchen Sink* painters in visual arts was well established by 1960.

It is also useful to remember that, at this time, artistic talent was valued as a useful commodity, working class children with an eye or a talent could access art school, could become draft people, artisans, designers and eventually educators in leading art schools.



Figure 4.  
Steve Pool Poly-technic.  
*Back to the future.*

However, much of this work, which predates the Community Arts movement, was focused on educating people to value authorised cultural production, it worked within and extended a view of culture that was extraordinary, that celebrated genius and the individual and was part of wider systems of power and control. By the 1950s, writers like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart were starting to question the significance of working-class culture.<sup>22</sup> What had previously been considered folk art or provincial, lacking in quality or primitive was to an extent reappraised, partly through a lens of nostalgia and partly through a resistance to increasing levels of alienation.<sup>23</sup>

Often associated with the political upheavals of 1968, Community Arts was also influenced by the global community development movement. With a focus on improving living conditions and the active participation of communities in the process from planning to evaluation, the community development movement helped to establish networks of tenants and residents groups, women's groups and adventure playgrounds. New housing developments in cities and the development of new towns built new communities, and the Community Arts movement found places, people and ideas to work with. Throughout much of the 1970s and early 1980s people would proudly describe themselves as community artists; a definition based on what they did rather than who they were. Fundamentally, they were committed to making art with people and, in turn, building a better, fairer society. Many community artists were trained in art schools – others were play workers or community activists. Rather than working in opposition to the art establishment they chose to be outside it or simply knowingly, or unknowingly, ignore it.

By the mid-1970s, Community Arts and Community Arts organisations had been recognized by Arts Council England as contributing to the cultural life of the nation. In 1974, a working party (Arts Council Great Britain 1974) was set up to interrogate the 'new development in the arts'. This would establish Community Arts as an independent category, thereby liberating it from some of the constraints and values applied to other categories of art (Figure 5). Their report published at the time states that:

Community artists' are distinguishable not by the techniques they use, although some (eg video, inflatables) are especially suited to their purposes, but by their attitude towards the place of their activities in the life of society... they hope to widen and deepen the sensibilities of the community in which they work and so enrich its existence.

<sup>22</sup>  
Hoggart 1967.  

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<sup>23</sup>  
Evans 1989.



Figure 5  
Peter Furniss. Action space inflatable.

Until the 1980s, the Community Arts movement was essentially political; it worked with marginalized communities with a focus on empowerment and improving living conditions. It challenged the value structures of the international art world, questioning individual authorship, quality, skill and the dominance of the gallery system. To do this, it advocated co-authorship and a focus on process above product. It situated itself within grass roots activism, and worked with readily available materials and processes including mural painting, scratch orchestras and public parades.

The backdrop to the Community Arts movement is situated in a specific moment in history. It grew from post-war politics in a time of radical change and re-evaluation. The very definition of art was in flux, the categories that had seemed to adequately describe something as art no longer seemed to fit the stuff that art was producing. New technologies, new political theories and emerging understanding of visual literacies were shaking the foundations of a future previously focused on progression and modernity.

By the 1980s, the political landscape was changing, the decline of traditional industries and the rise of neoliberal politics unsettled an artistic movement that was always aligned to left-wing politics. The term 'community arts' began to be associated with an old fashioned set of practices that lacked an authentic political or activist perspective. Even to many of its practitioners, Community Arts no longer felt new or alternative. Under theorised and, to some extent, anti-intellectual the movement lost its way and, to a degree, also lost support and understanding at a government and community level.



*The backdrop to the Community Arts movement is situated in a specific moment in history. It grew from post war politics in a time of radical change and re-evaluation. The very definition of art was in flux, the categories' that had seemed to adequately describe something as art no longer seemed to fit the stuff that art was producing.*



### 3.

## THE LEGACY OF THE COMMUNITY ARTS MOVEMENT

As with other artistic movements, the people and organisations involved in generating the Community Arts movement did so for different reasons. Many community artists had an art school education and were reacting to the constraints of a gallery system that no longer met their requirements for creative expression, or denied them access. Others were youth workers, political activists, architects, musicians and writers. Many were riding the wave of 1968 with all its rich potential for change and renewal, others were catapulted into action through working directly in communities; responding to local needs within their own communities and seeing the potential for change in people. It is hardly surprising that the legacy of the Community Arts movement is as diverse as the people involved in creating it. Some of the key approaches from the Community Arts movement that can be identified as a tradition or ideology that we can see in aspects of Participatory Arts today are:

- The need to challenge existing codes and conventions within and beyond art production.
- A focus on participants as producers not only consumers of the arts.
- A commitment to wider social change and improvement.
- An anti-elitist approach.
- A commitment to politics of the Left.
- A commitment to place and community.

By the late 1980s, the term 'Community Arts' began to fall from common use. Youth workers would still paint murals, community theatre would promenade through our towns and villages, people would make scarecrows, paint their faces, carry lanterns, fight for human rights, protest, occupy, paint and sing together, and artists would often be involved. It was not that the Community Arts movement had become mainstream, it remained on the margins of what is considered art; it was considered provincial or 'less than authorised' art. It persisted as a mode of production, yet as a political movement it was appropriated, absorbed and instrumentalised to a point where the potency of the term became diluted. Artists started to refer to their practice as social or participatory, projects became hybrid, much of the work still aimed to be critical and aspire towards principles of cultural democracy, yet the clarity of its foundational aims to '*widen and deepen the sensibilities of the community in which they work and so enrich its existence*' was at best diluted and at worst forgotten.

The artistic methods that are now associated with Community Arts are spread across art forms and include community theatre, mural painting, carnivals, poetry slams and print workshops. However, the common thread that runs through all activities is a belief that people everywhere, all people, are able to participate in a cultural life; a cultural life that includes making as well as consuming culture. From this core idea, the structures, approaches, techniques, and traditions of the Community Arts movement evolved. Artists who were trained to see themselves as an exception, a professional with a specific set of skills they had refined and 'practised', positioned themselves outside of the system that had produced them. It is hardly surprising that their work, and, to an extent, their professional lives became conflicted:

**They wanted to make art collaboratively, with and for communities, in places and ways that validated people's own culture. They mostly had little interest in individual practice or careers, though the artists' own vision and aesthetics often had a greater influence than they recognised.<sup>24</sup>**

The essential drive of the Community Arts movement was not oppositional to mainstream culture, rather it suggested that culture was wider, more open and that people everywhere had the potential to fully participate in its creation, consumption and validation. It is useful to see the Community Arts movement as a vision, a move towards what would later be called 'Cultural Democracy' rather than a simple challenge to a problematic status-quo.

When we look to history to inform our present it can be useful to wear rose tinted spectacles with a plaster stuck over the lens to obscure some of the bits we don't want to look at. At its best, the British Community Arts movement held a disruptive power that, through ignoring the current state of things and believing in the potential for change, left a legacy that flows, often unacknowledged, into Participatory Art production today.

### 3.1 The Artists Placement Group (APG)

The APG were also concerned with taking art out of the gallery, they coined the slogan *The context is half the work*. Their position on the role of the artists in society was very different to the Community Arts movement. The APG was founded by Barbara Steveni with her husband John Latham in the mid-1960s. As with the Community Arts movement, it emerged from the idea that artists could not fully reach their potential within an institutionalised gallery system. The APG's suggestion that the context is half the work was radical at the time as much of what was considered art only existed in the gallery. It now feels like a statement that sits on the fence, like the person who buys 50–50 white and brown bread; concerned for their health but not that concerned.

In contrast to the Community Arts movement, the APG celebrated the professional status and social position of the artist, suggesting that they had much to offer the worlds of business and civic life. Latham began to refer to artists in placement as the 'Incidental Persons'. The extraordinary nature of the individual would bring aesthetic alternative ways of seeing and thinking to address the day-to-day lives of host organisations. The APG would embrace the artist's outsider status, yet place themselves within organisations; they often produced artworks, but systemic change was a central aim of each placement.

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<sup>24</sup>  
Masarato 2013.

Many of the artists who worked with the APG, for example, Ian Breakwell, Barry Flannigan and Latham himself, went on to become significant individuals within the gallery system. Their work is important here as a backdrop to the histories that inform how an arts practitioner works and how they may perceive themselves within a research project. The APG artists saw their role as offering new routes, new ways of seeing and implementing new types of action within their placement organisation. Their major concern was to develop a new role for art and artists, not to build a better world or to create opportunities for mass participation, although this, on occasion, did happen as part of their work.

### 3.2 From Community Art to Participatory Arts

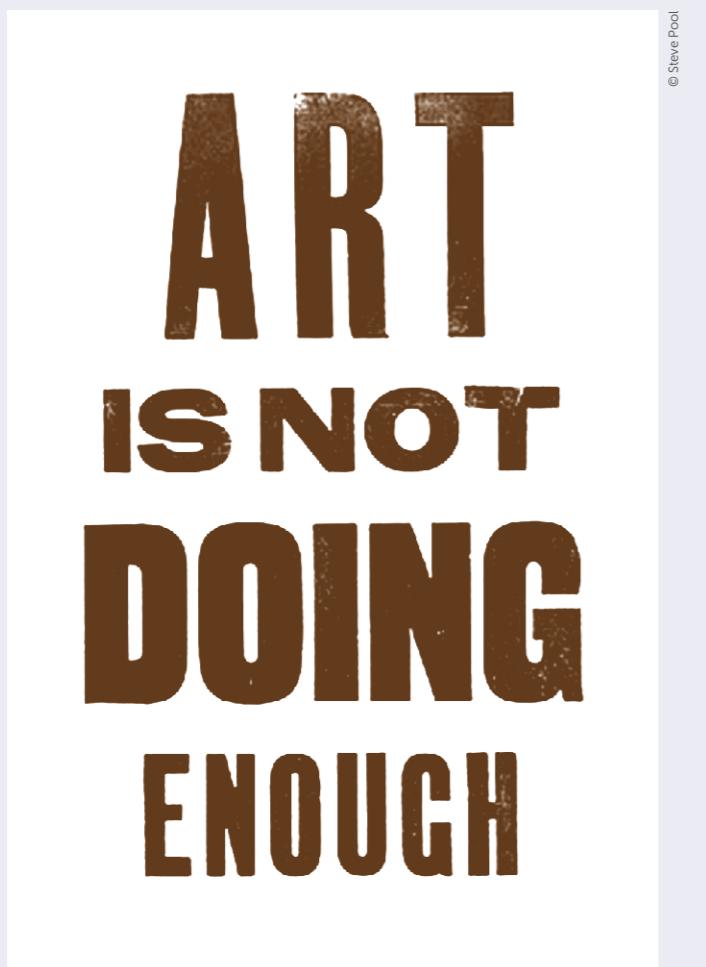
If Community Art can be described as a movement with a start and a finish, the move towards an art of participation can be seen as a continuum. It draws on multiple practices and theories, it can involve the spectacle, the event, it can emancipate, alleviate oppression and disempower.

Participation is often presented as an unconditionally good thing, but it is not always the case that people are encouraged to participate in activities that develop their common good. With no edges or clear definition, participation is a battleground of words, a site of empowerment and objectification, and a place of contradictions.<sup>25</sup> Artists pay people minimum wage to tattoo their skin (Sierra 2000), build cinemas in old petrol stations (Assemble 2014), they offer abortions to women on boats that sail in international waters (Women on the Waters 1999). In realizing their ideas, artists do not sign the Hippocratic oath, they do not promise to do no harm, they are not working for the greater good.

As with other artistic movements, the turn to participation emerges from the bottom up, through practice. For many reasons, a group of artists will start to produce work that responds to the given social and artistic situation. The work may not be addressing a social need, yet it may be responding to a social situation. An emphasis on art which encourages people to become involved on a more explicit level, asking questions of authorship, ownership and community, can be understood as a response to growing feelings of isolation and individualism.

Unlike the Community Arts movement, Participatory Arts presents a diffuse set of practices. The common thread between both approaches (involving people within the making and consumption of art) is apparent, yet we need to be careful to recognize the differences as well as what they have in common. Participatory artists may not have a shared commitment to challenging elites or developing community; the concern or attention of the work may be focused elsewhere.

When developing a research project with artists, it is useful to consider how the art process engages with people and the differing focus of an artist's involvement. It is important to consider if an artist will be authoring a work and developing a personal vision for a completed outcome – or simply facilitating participants' involvement.



**Figure 6**  
Steve Pool Poly-technic.

*By renaming their practice 'participatory arts', artists working in social contexts seemed to free themselves from all this unhappy lumber in a single bound. The new term was neutral and descriptive, a simple statement of what the work did.*

“  
(Matarasso, 2013)

### 3.3 The art critic's perspective

Any examination of participation within the arts and how this relates to the use of artistic methods within research cannot avoid the more recent debate in the field of art criticism and the artistic developments that surround this area. Anne Douglas, in this series, provides a more recent history of these debates and explores in detail how artists and art theorists work with the complex issues of participation within the field of contemporary art. I include a few brief pointers here to contextualise some of my discussions in relation to these academic and critical debates.

As I write this review, many artists who work directly with people as part of their art making would describe this work as a **social practice**. This phrase covers a broad area of artistic practice, including new traditions that are often presented as oppositional. Social artworks can take place in a gallery or can reject the gallery system, they can be co-produced and co-authored or be idiosyncratic and individual. It could be argued that a social arts practice challenges the distinction between art as autonomous and art as part of the praxis of everyday life, however, the field is massively contested by the art establishment, critical theorists, artists and audiences.

For example, the American Art critic Grant Kester's writing is often used as shorthand to refer to the very old debate that separates a process from a product and often sets one against the other. It is debatable if Kester intended this simplification, he clearly suggests that by applying an aesthetic lens to aspects of an 'art event' that may have previously been considered the processes of arts production, a different value system can emerge. The aspiration to broaden the focus of aesthetic criticism to involve all aspects of an art event presents a singularity where the 'work' is constituted by a complex set of relationships to the world. This demands a different way to understand arts, qualities and values.

From this perspective, using 'an artistic method' within a research project is problematic. The idea of the work of art as a totality, where process, product, relationships, ideas and meaning are entwined, suggests that nothing is contingent; no part of the process is 'up for grabs' to be borrowed or repurposed to other uses.

Here, artistic researchers and artists can be resistant to techniques and practices being taken out of context and appropriated as a method to conduct research rather than to make art. It is easy to see how conflict arises when a practice which is considered relational, critical and growing from more than a century of angst and self-doubt is reduced to a set of techniques or approaches, a tool kit or box of tricks.

### 3.4 Practice-based Research (P-a-R)

Most artists would describe much of their creative process as research. They will apply for funding for research and development; they rehearse, sketch, plan, explore, and use different processes to explore their worlds. Many artists who work within universities maintain a studio practice that is no different to artists working outside universities. There is a long tradition of practice-based research in many disciplines such as design, architecture and engineering, many medical degrees are based on, and assessed through, practice. High quality rigorous research is not restricted to Higher Education (HE) institutions, yet it is important to consider how the field is developing and how language is used within universities if we are to develop participatory research projects there.

The term Practice as Research or P-a-R has developed a specific meaning within universities. In the mid-1990's, the field expanded responding to the demand for doctoral study within art and design and recognition for practice-based approaches to the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Underpinned by the work of Robin Nelson, P-a-R has developed a broad base within universities, yet it is not fully accepted as a description for all artistic practice that takes place there.<sup>26</sup> P-a-R developed against a backdrop of changes within art production and its relationship to the social world, it may involve galleries and established art methods, and is often presented as a fully developed mode of research or a methodology. This parallels concern within social sciences that traditional methods are unable to surface critical aspects and ways of knowing about lived experience.<sup>27</sup>

It could be argued that, in comparison to traditional artistic approaches, P-a-R implies a more systematic and measurable approach to finding out about the world through artistic exploration. P-a-R projects can focus on artistic methods and artistic outputs, or they may align with hypothesis-driven empirical research. Here, arts practices are used to test theories within larger and cross disciplinary teams, however, the outputs of this type of research may still be manifested within a creative form, for example, dance is used to explore and present movement, or film and video to explore the politics of space.

P-a-R does not necessarily require a written outcome; it presents research outputs through an artistic form, it is not merely a catalyst for conversation or a means to gather data for a later linguistic interpretation. It is helpful to frame P-a-R as research, where questions and contexts are articulated through the practice itself and the primary outcome of the research enquiry is an artwork or series of artworks that generate new knowledges through this aesthetic, conceptual, technical practice. However, in reality, P-a-R often includes a form of critical-reflexive writing and documentation that sits in proximity to the practice, this often takes the form of a portfolio of work including, but not limited to, the artwork(s), associated documentation and a complementary set of writings that articulate and give context to different aspects of the research.

What does all of this mean for researchers wanting to use arts practice in collaborative research?

<sup>26</sup>  
Nelson 2013.

<sup>27</sup>  
Law 2010.

## 4.

### WHAT SHOULD I CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING TO USE ARTISTIC METHODS IN RESEARCH?

The potential for using artistic methods within any research is considerable. They can be successfully employed to engage with people to create moments of exchange and reflection and offer a space that is at one point ordinary and at another extraordinary. Poetry, music, writing, and the visual and lens-based arts all have a rich history of participation, the art forms are accessible and are not owned by or controlled by experts, arts institutions, or people in power. It is important not to offer advice as it is up to each of us to find our own way, our own set of relationships and considerations of what is both appropriate and ethical. Instead of advice, I offer a checklist, a reminder of what it may be useful to carry with you into any collaborative research project that draws on artistic methods:

- Don't assume any art form is neutral.
- Don't anticipate what you will be able to find out from an artistic method.
- Don't set anything in stone.
- Don't expect artists to do what you ask them to do.
- Don't forget the histories and traditions of practice of the art forms you choose to explore.
- Don't forget to take a breath.
- Don't hold on to it for too long.
- Don't forget that everything and nothing is up for grabs.
- Do some research to make sure you know what you are letting yourself in for.
- Do consider resources; make sure you have access to the materials and equipment you will need to do what you want to do.
- Do think about the history of any art form – be faithful to it, be critical of it.
- Do get stuck in and have a go – other people will follow.
- Do be aware that people can sometimes give more than they want to give.
- Do make time and space to reflect and adapt.
- Do have a good rationale for why you would work with an arts practitioner.

## 5. CASE STUDIES

### 5.1 Odd Numbers

*Odd Numbers* was part of 'Remaking Society' an AHRC Connected Communities project.<sup>28</sup> Nicola Atkinson (NADFLY), a Glasgow-based artist, worked with Lee Ivett/Baxendale and the *Love Milton Project* (Figure 7). Milton is an area of Glasgow that is considered to lack the strong sense of community identity found in other areas of the city. The project aimed to develop an artwork that would help develop or remake place; exploring identity, storytelling, myth making and objects.

NADFLY was inspired by the people of Milton to make '365 wee stoneware creatures' that evolved from the ideas each participant had of themselves transformed into an animal. The intention was that after giving all participants the creature to 'look after' for a while they would be returned and buried for posterity to bring participants together and promote a new living myth.

This work sits within the personal practice of Nicola Atkinson who is an internationally recognized artist working in the social realm. The project explores myths and engages people within the project development at many points of encounter. The artwork can be described as the totality of the project from conception to completion and it is driven by an individual practice. Although part of a much larger research project, it manages to keep its edges. The artwork generates its own logics, motivations and narrative, and the research emerges from the work rather than the work becoming an instrument of research.

*Odd Numbers* demonstrates the potential and difficulties of working with artists within research. The work has its own logic and cycle of completion. For good or for ill, regardless of the views and concerns of the participants the new artefacts must be invested in and then buried. Nicola spent weeks in her studio fashioning the small creatures and investing time and attention in the individual nature of each figure. This attention to detail signifies her investment in the project and so in turn the participants'. In the process of its unfolding, the artwork creates a focal point, a mode of engagement and an outcome that presents ourselves back to us.

Many projects use objects as a starting point for a set of conversations, people are asked to bring something significant to a training day at work. Some people will forget, bring a bottle of water, their house keys, a few will give up their phone. By working with an artist with a practice that focuses on exploring the nature of community, the process of making, investing in, giving up become heightened. Nicola calls the process of her art 'the mechanism'. It is part of her but also separate, the practice has a life of its own.

28

[https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project\\_resources/remaking-society/](https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project_resources/remaking-society/)

To integrate the individual practice that drove a project like *Odd Numbers* into a broader research project exploring the remaking of society is difficult, the work is driven by an artist's creative practice and the major outcome is an artwork. It could be said that this work is co-produced with a community, yet it does not follow many of the tropes of co-production. The people/audience/spectators participate in the artwork at a predefined level, they can choose to opt out or, as many did, subvert the rules of the engagement, yet they are asked to participate in an artist's logic, the cycle of a work. Co-produced projects suggest a partnership and equality from the initial conception through to completion. However, within a complex project driven by a personal artistic practice, approach and history, it is difficult to involve participants on this level. People walk into the project and become part of it, they can shape and reform it from the inside, but there is a need to step into the mechanism before becoming part of it.

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Figure 7  
Nicola Atkinson.  
*Odd Numbers*, stoneware creatures.



## 5.2 Being Cindy Sherman project

The *Being Cindy Sherman* project was part of the Community Arts Zone (CAZ) research project, which explored how **creative methods** could be used in research with young people (Figure 8). The project drew on the photographic style of Cindy Sherman, an international artist who is best known for her work on identity. She poses in a variety of costumes and makeup presenting archetypes within photographic portraits. She is both the photographer and the photographed. The project worked closely with high school teachers and students over six weeks in three secondary school sites in the Niagara area in Canada, where students completed their own conceptual photographs and attended an exhibition of their work at a local art gallery. The researchers assert:

**The appeal of Cindy Sherman's work lies in her capacity to disrupt stereotypes and archetypes and to engage in identity work through photographic and design techniques.<sup>29</sup>**

Cindy Sherman's body of visual practice over 40 years tells visual stories that present tensions and contestations around performing identities. The project found that young people engaged strongly with Cindy Sherman's work responding by representing parts of their lives such as indigeneity, homophobia and bulimia, or, alternatively, generated alter egos, representations of themselves – a superhero, Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy. Young people were encouraged to write texts to accompany the photographs in an attempt to extend their stories and actively take control of the image interpretation, they also invited audiences to interpret the photographs.

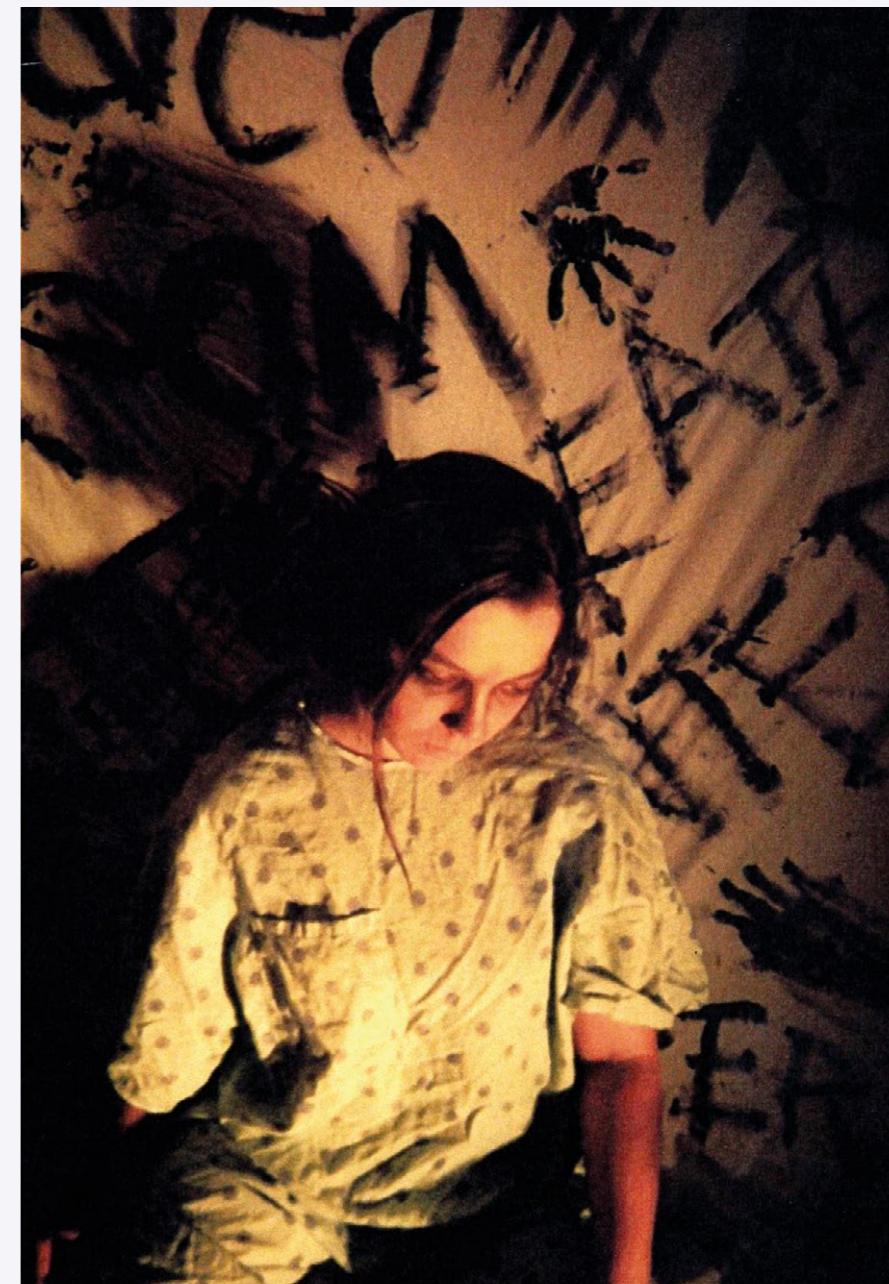
The researchers used multiple approaches to find out about identity through the *Being Cindy Sherman* project. Using an existing artwork as a catalyst, they drew attention to multiple aspects of how we present and represent our identity, and how these representations impact on our selfhood:

**As opposed to focusing on process or product, we preferred to think of the Being Cindy Sherman assignment as questioning, journeying, and experimenting to find a photographic style. We conducted interviews with three case study students in each high school as well as taking field notes during observations and hands-on work with students. All teachers involved in the research were interviewed, and their perspectives underpin our analyses.<sup>30</sup>**

The research project's central concern was examining how young people take photographs in the context of the ubiquity of contemporary image-making that is part of the everyday and how this relates to other literacy practices. It was hypothesized that fluid, dynamic and deeply embodied interactions display a brand of imagination, thinking and creativity that is tied up with experiencing a moment in time and playing with that experience.

**29**  
Rowsell and Vietgen 2017: 93.

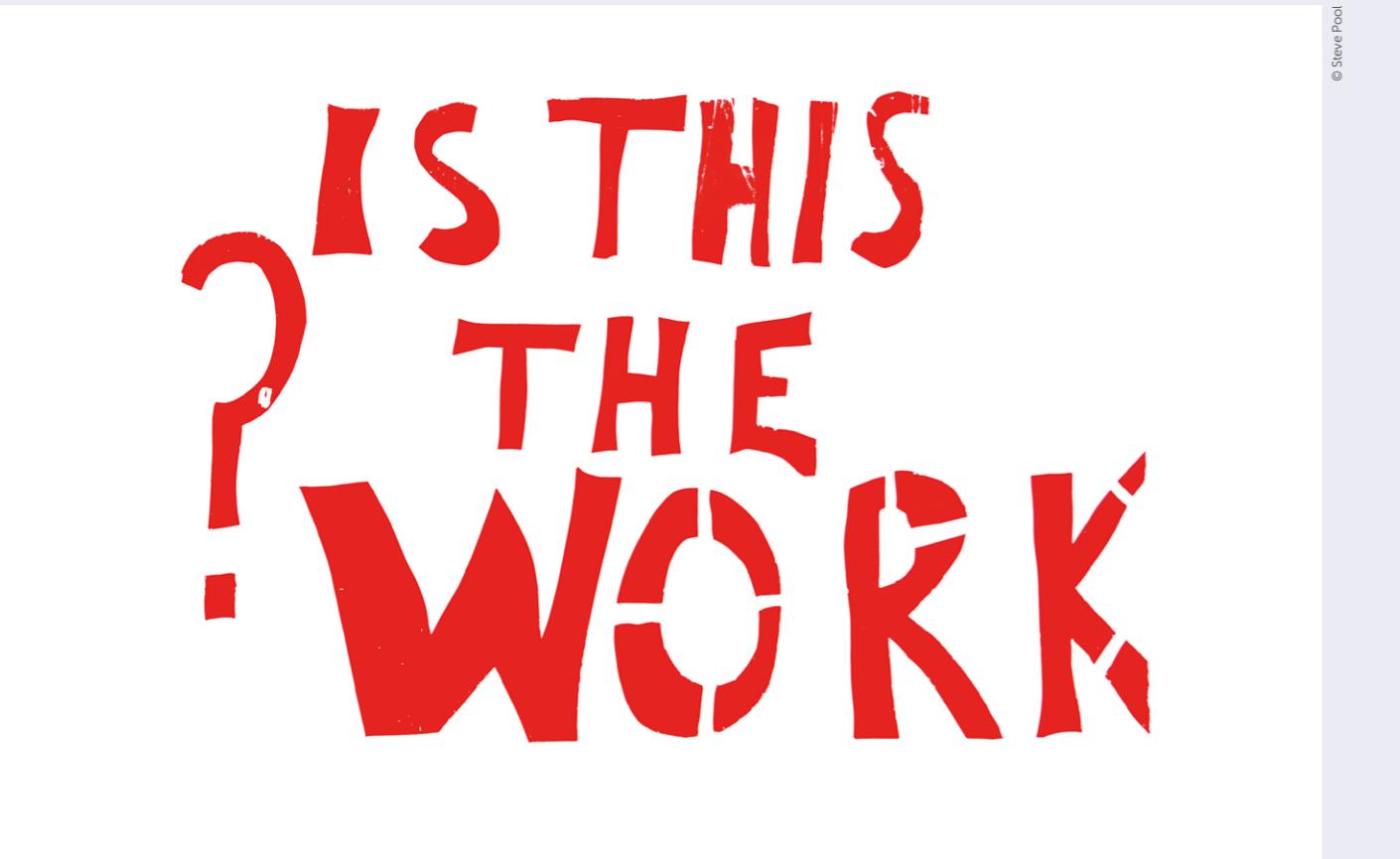
**30**  
Rowsell and Vietgen 2017: 94.



**Figure 8**  
*Being Cindy Sherman Project.*

© Jennifer Rowsell

## 6. REFLECTIONS



**Figure 9**  
Steve Pool Poly-technic.  
Screen print of the work.

In the title of this piece, I suggest that everything and nothing is up for grabs, by this I mean that many artistic methods are readily available and that you do not need artistic training or to describe yourself as an artist; it is fine to experiment and explore how to use artistic methods within research (Figure 9). Film, poetry, visual art, and dance are all ways to work with people to explore thoughts, ideas and situations. The *Being Cindy Sherman* project demonstrates how the practice of an international artist can be used to unlock thoughts and ideas when working with young people. *Odd Numbers* is an example of how an artist's drive and vision for their practice can create new myths, stories and understanding within communities. It is useful to remember that artistic methods draw on a deep history of traditions, approaches and politics, and that these may impact on how an artistic method is used within a research project. The debate around art as 'ordinary' or art as 'autonomous' will inform whether we apply an artistic method as a tool towards a specific defined end or as a way to produce an artwork in and of itself. This will impact on what is achieved and also on what we will define success as. The Community Arts movement and, later, Participatory Arts expanded definitions and refocused how art could manifest itself in the world. This move from the gallery into the social realm generated further possibilities where we imagine artistic methods as part of a tool kit of approaches that can liberate research participants to think differently, to approach the world in a way that allows new thoughts and ideas to emerge collectively.

It is important to remember that many art making processes present us with a complex assemblage of philosophy, histories and traditions. Many artists work within a distinct set of ideas that come from training and practice; their relationship to their work may not be straightforward. There are conflicting ideas within art that, for many, cannot be separated from its methods; art's relationship with people and place and identity, how it can relate to politics and power.

None of these conflicts need necessarily to be taken into account if a research project makes a collective decision to explore the agency of artistic method. Everything is up for grabs. However, the context, history and individual's experiences of these may have a great influence on what new knowledges emerge and how we struggle to make sense of them.

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## GLOSSARY

### Artistic method

An art form for example painting, drawing, or poetry. An approach that draws upon an artistic tradition.

### Artistic method in research

Using an art form as part of a research project, to engage with people and find things out. For example, running a poetry project to explore peoples experience of migration.

### Artistic practice

The work of an individual artist or collaboration, often used to describe a body of work and it's context.

### Creative method in research

Any approach to research that is not considered a traditional social science approach. This could include artistic methods but may also include innovative digital, or hybrid and cross disciplinary approaches to research.

### Community Arts

A movement that took art outside art galleries and worked with people in their communities.

### Participatory Art

Arts that involve people in making and doing art, for example people taking part in the creative process. There are many levels of engagement, however people are expected to be more than a simple spectator.

### Relational Aesthetics

French critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud used this term to identify a new body of work in the 1990's that was inspired by the world of human relations. Much of this work was made by artists in a gallery context.

### Social practice

Artists who work directly with people and are concerned with society beyond the gallery.

### Studio practice

Art or artworks that are made within an artists studio, this term is used to imply that the works are focused on an individual artists ideas explorations.

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